



**Final Report**  
**LATVIA: PARLIAMENTARY ASSISTANCE**  
**USAID Cooperative Agreement No. EUR-0021-A-00-4028-00**  
**January 1994 to June 1996**

**I. SUMMARY**

Between January 1994 and June 1996, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) conducted a parliamentary assistance program in Latvia. NDI's activities were designed primarily to support the efforts of the deputies and staff of the Latvian parliament (*Saeima*) to establish the Saeima as a more effective, representative and accountable institution. During some of this time, NDI also used funds from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to strengthen the role of the civic sector in Latvia by working with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Following the end of USAID funding, NDI continued the program with NED funds, integrating its work with the parliament and with civic leaders to promote wider public participation in the legislative process.

**II. BACKGROUND**

Since regaining its independence in 1991, successive Latvian governments have implemented reforms which have established the foundations of a democratic Latvian state and a market-oriented economy. However, the transition has not been without difficulty. Latvian politics has been characterized by fractious quarreling and shifting affiliations. Continuing high inflation, unemployment and the dismemberment of Latvia's social safety net have caused disillusionment among large segments of the population and a lack of confidence in ruling institutions. This was particularly true during the period covered by NDI's program, which encompassed the financial crisis triggered by the failure of the "Baltija" Bank.

Public dissatisfaction, fueled by the perception that the government had been unresponsive to the country's problems, was manifested in the results of the 1995 parliamentary elections, in which the ruling party lost more than half of its seats to extreme parties on both the left and right. With no clear majority party or bloc, the parliament succeeded in forming a new government only after three attempts. Since then, Latvia has seen two more changes in government and numerous political realignments.

NDI has provided assistance in Latvia and throughout the Baltic States since 1991 by conducting programs on democratic institution-building and civic and voter education. In November

1993, NDI sent a small team to Latvia to conduct consultations on draft legislation and to observe the workings of the parliament, including committee activities, floor debates, and the conduct of party caucuses and coalitions.

In 1994, NDI received a two-year grant from USAID to conduct a program to assist the Saeima. The Institute opened a one-person field office in Riga in February 1994 to act as a source of information and support for Saeima members and their staff. During the first year and a half of the program, Field Representative Jill Pender, an American attorney and legislative expert, provided regular consultations to members of parliament and their staff and conducted a series of seminars on legislative issues. Subsequent NDI field representatives developed programming emphasizing the relationship between elected officials and their constituents.

### **III. OBJECTIVES**

The primary objective of NDI's two-year program was to support the development of democratic organization and practices in Latvia's parliament. Specifically, NDI sought to:

- C Enhance the organizational capacity of members and groups within the parliament to raise the level of professionalism of the Saeima as a legislative institution
- C Encourage the Saeima to adopt transparent procedures
- C Promote communication between Saeima members and their constituents
- C Establish NDI as an in-country resource center that could respond to specific informational requests for materials on legislative practice

### **IV. ACTIVITIES**

#### **1) Enhancing Internal Organization and Professionalism in the Parliament**

Throughout the fall of 1994, NDI sought to encourage the formation of legislative coalitions within parliament around individual issues. In pursuit of this goal, NDI organized roundtable discussions for women members of parliament so that deputies across the political spectrum could discuss issues of common interest. On September 14, 1994, ten of fifteen female women MPs then in the Saeima attended a discussion on the role of women in politics, moderated by Ms. Hege Hero, former Secretary General of the Women's Association of Norway's Conservative Party. An October 18, 1994 forum focused on legislation governing domestic abuse and the protection of women and children. It featured Mr. Ivars Krievans, a Latvian-American attorney working with Latvia's Ministry of Justice. On November 14, 1994, Ms. Ilze Melngaile, the head of the Latvian Family Planning and Sexual Health Center, spoke about family planning issues and public health.

NDI's programming also addressed the role of political parties in the legislature. On March 31 and April 1, 1995, NDI held a political strategy roundtable for leaders of parliamentary factions and political party organizers, to discuss the link between legislative factions and party organizations. One goal of the program was to encourage faction leaders and members of parliament to think about their role in helping their parties organize for the Latvian parliamentary elections which were scheduled for later that year. National and regional campaign managers from three Estonian political parties joined the discussion to share their experiences from recent elections in Estonia.

Following the election of the Sixth Saeima on September 30 and October 1, 1995, NDI hosted a two-day orientation seminar for new Saeima members. The seminar was designed to introduce newly elected deputies to the Saeima as an institution as well as to familiarize them with the principles of modern parliamentary practice. The seminar was held in the main Saeima building and was organized with the cooperation of the Saeima administrative staff. NDI invited three international parliamentary experts to conduct the sessions: Peter Hack, a current member of parliament from Hungary; Dermot Englefield, former librarian of the British House of Commons; and Susan Benda, NDI senior program officer for governance. NDI also invited returning and former Latvian MPs and staff to make presentations.

More than 30 newly elected MPs and staff attended the seminar, which featured sessions on the functions of members of parliament; the role and organization of political parties in parliament; the legislative process in the Saeima; and governmental openness and ethics. In addition, participants were given a tour of the Saeima building and an explanation of the services of the Saeima support staff.

## **2) Promoting Transparency in Government Decision-making**

To help promote openness in government decision-making, NDI organized a seminar in Riga for the members of the Latvian parliament on "Public Access to Government Information." The program, which took place on October 3, 1994, was prompted by the Saeima's consideration of a proposal to make all government information essentially secret. Experts from Hungary, Sweden, Portugal, and the United States made presentations that were designed to establish the public's "right to know" and provide options for regulating access to information consistent with this principle. Plenary sessions, discussion groups and workshops focused on the obligation of administrative agencies to provide the public with information; the need for restricting access to information in such cases of national security, commercial secrets, and personal privacy; and the role of the courts in reviewing the government's interpretation and implementation of such exceptions.

The program enjoyed a strong turnout of 33 members of parliament and 40 government officials, including Latvia's State Ministers of Human Rights and Reform, representatives of the legal community, the military and the press. Following the program, NDI published a report of the conference, attaching the texts of freedom of information laws from several countries, which has been distributed to NDI partners around the world.

NDI continued to emphasize transparency in government proceedings with a January 30, 1995 panel discussion on the media's right to report on criminal investigations. The program was designed following several weeks of political debate about Latvia's escalating crime problem and the extent to which crimes, especially those involving public officials, should be covered by the press. Entitled "Fair Trials, Free Press and Criminal Investigations," the program featured a panel of legal experts, journalists, and a representative of the Latvian Ministry of the Interior. More than 70 members of parliament and their staff, ministry officials, journalists, and members of the legal community participated in the program to discuss the rights of the media, the accused and government.

### **3) Promoting Communication Between the Legislature and Constituents**

NDI built on its initial work to support transparent mechanisms for government decision-making by promoting greater access by citizens and interest groups to the governing process. A June 12, 1995 roundtable on advocacy, cosponsored with the Saeima legal department, addressed the question of how the lawmaking process can be made more open and accessible to all, while also limiting corruption. More than 30 participants, representing Saeima members and staff, government officials, and a number of Latvian NGOs, participated. International panelists Ken Payne, NDI field representative, and Tibor Vidos, a government relations specialist from Hungary, were joined by Ojars Blumbergs, a former member of the Saeima, Andris Kravalis, vice-chairman of the Latvian Federation of Free Trade Unions, and Kristians Rozenvalds, director of the Latvian Media Foundation in leading the discussion. During the program, NDI distributed materials describing the role and regulation of citizen participation in the legislative process in the U.S. and other countries.

NDI continued this theme of the responsibility of elected officials to their constituents with its April 18 and 19, 1996 "Accountability Seminar." The seminar was designed to emphasize public participation in the legislative process by viewing the issue both from the perspective of lawmakers and from the civic sector. The first day of the program was attended by representatives of more than 50 Latvian NGOs, who sought to understand their role as public policy advocates, learn about the legislative process, to develop advocacy campaign strategies. The second day of the program was held in the Saeima for deputies and staff, in order to encourage their responsibility for constituent outreach, to discuss mechanisms, such as hearings or public meetings, for working more effectively with the electorate, and to emphasize the productive role that NGOs can play in the development of legislation. The program ended with a reception in which participants from both days' programs had an opportunity to meet with one another in an informal setting.

NDI invited three international civic advocacy and legislative experts to conduct the sessions: Ross Reid, a former member of parliament and cabinet minister from Canada; Michael Brogioli, NDI's Baltic field representative for the Democracy Network Program; and Kathy "K.P." Pelleran, the program coordinator for civic advocacy programs in NDI's office in Moscow. In addition, NDI invited Latvian government, Saeima, and NGO representatives to make presentations.

#### **4) Establishing NDI as an In-Country Resource Center**

Over the course of the program, NDI field representatives and NDI's office in Riga served as in-country resources, able to respond to specific requests for information and materials on legislative and civic advocacy practice.

Through regular consultations with members of parliament and their staff, NDI provided Saeima members and staff with information on such issues as constituent relations, the structure of political party organization in parliament, and the development of effective legislative staff. NDI also helped Saeima members and staff obtain materials on political advertising, financial disclosure, the budget and appropriations process, rules of procedure, and ethics and corruption, as well as more topical issues such as broadcast media, telecommunications, the environment, tax regulations, and agriculture. Over the course of the program, NDI/Riga distributed a newsletter within Latvia's political community which provided materials related to programmatic topics.

#### **V. POST-USAID PROGRAMMING**

Following the end of its USAID grant, NDI continued its activities in Latvia with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and through participation, as a subgrantee to the U.S.-Baltic Foundation, in USAID's Democracy Network Program. NDI was able to use NED funding to continue its field presence and pursue programming designed to integrate NDI's work with the Latvian parliament and its contacts with Latvian NGOs. Most notably, NDI produced an advocacy handbook for Latvian NGOs that included a description of the legislative process in the parliament. Through its participation in DemNet, NDI provided advocacy training and advice on organizational development to NGOs throughout Latvia.

#### **VI. PROGRAM EVALUATION**

The main goal of NDI's program was to support the development of the Latvian Saeima as a modern, professional legislature which incorporates democratic practices and organization. It must be said that while NDI's programming was well received, NDI's presence did not have a profound impact on the way in which the Saeima conducts its business. In part, this is due to the fact that at the time of NDI's arrival, the Saeima was already an established institution whose procedures were in many cases consistent with standard parliamentary practice. NDI struggled to find its niche in the parliament and to identify areas where its expertise could add value. In doing so, NDI was able to achieve these results:

- In the weeks following NDI's "Access to Government Information" seminar, the Saeima redesigned its press bureau and selected a new director. The parliament stated its intention to make itself more open to the public and to encourage public participation in the legislative process. A news article reported that the deputy chair of the Saeima stated that the discussions that took place during the NDI program were the "decisive impulse" behind these changes.

- C The two seminars addressing transparency encouraged the Riga-based Independent Information and Research Bureau (NIP) to organize a series of roundtables to explore the role of an independent media in a democratic state. NDI helped the NIP secure funding for the project and helped to organize a first panel discussion, on January 22, 1996, on the media's performance in the 1995 parliamentary elections, that was widely covered in the local press, including the English-language *Baltic Times*.
- C NDI's orientation program for deputies in October 1995 provided useful and practical information to most of the newly elected deputies. Moreover, by incorporating the participation of Saeima members and staff in the design and execution of the program, NDI was able to provide a model that the Saeima can reproduce on its own in the future. Latvian press reports lauded NDI for organizing the program (and admonished those deputies who had not participated).
- C The 1996 "Accountability Seminar" successfully reached both elected officials and civic activities with strategies for working together on policy issues. The concluding reception brought many legislators and civic organizers together for the first time, and deputies thanked NDI for its role in bringing them into closer contact with their own constituents.